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The craft of words **Art for art's sake**

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Dean Lewins/AAP

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Most people who have completed a cultural studies or sociology degree in recent decades will have come across the world of Pierre Bourdieu, one of that army of extraordinary scholars who filled the 20th century with ideas and tools for thought.

Central to Bourdieu's work on art and literature is the argument that the creative world is bifurcated, between art done "for art's sake", and art produced for a market. This logic of production, which Bourdieu named "the economic world reversed", has long dominated perceptions of what matters as art, and what is just entertainment.

But the practicalities of creative production, regardless of what audience it suits, is that it takes time, skill, and the funds to purchase materials and secure production space. Lucky artists will be independently wealthy or supported by a wealthy parent or spouse, but such individuals are thin on the ground.

The government has recognised the conundrum this poses — a society needs art; art need artists capable of making it; and since art doesn't (usually) pay, both art and artists need support.

Since before Federation, governments have provided arts funding: according to cultural economist David Throsby, the first example was the payment of two cows to poet Michael Massey Robinson in the early 19th century. After this livestock-based economy, the government shifted to a more conventional money-and-infrastructure system, finally establishing the Australia Council for the Arts in 1975.

However, the amount of public money committed to the arts, the areas supported, the make-up of committees tasked to evaluate applications and award funding, and the extent to which government officials are involved in the process have all been debated, sometimes hotly.

In 2015 this came to a head, with then Arts Minister George Brandis raiding the Australia Council, and taking control of a large chunk of its budget to establish his own program. While this has been recently reversed, the Council has not yet had funding fully restored; and in any event, the damage has been done: many artists and arts organisations have lost years of funding, and their futures are uncertain.

If the state and territory governments pick up the slack (as the Victorian Government has, to some extent), things might look rosier; but, as ACT-based artists recently discovered, nothing is sure.

Funding for arts in the Capital Territory has fallen dramatically in recent years. While the ACT government has promised to restore funding, some artists will not be able to wait for the next year's funding round.

This is a genuine problem for practitioners; money does, after all, make the world go round, and even artists have to eat. In a recent issue of *The Lifted Brow*, subtitled *The Capital Issue*, writers tease out the problem of art's relationship to money.

This begins with the editorial, where Annabel Brady-Brown and Zoe Dzunko discuss "the anxieties produced by the logic of capital" in the context of art, which is produced at "below-minimum-wage-all-the-way-down-to-zilch-payment", using its own production as an example (Q: how many hours went into making it? A: 2,337. Q: what paid per hour to the production team? A: About zilch).

Across the country creative practitioners provide their inspiration and expertise to little or nothing; meantime the arts sector contributes substantially to GDP.

And yet the federal Minister for Education recently named VET-sector creative arts training programs "lifestyle choices", and removed them from the list of "legitimate courses".

Writer after writer in *The Lifted Brow* addresses this conundrum. Ellena Savage produces a portrait of the writer's life, averring that

every decision I have made so far in both my writing and love life has, to some extent, been made with day-to-day money and future money in mind.



The Lifted Brow

Others point out that we can't buy houses, or afford to keep renting in the suburbs we love (Doyle): we measure our lives no longer in coffee spoons but in dollars. And while the culture provides distractions — encouraging obsessions about food (Wright); calming us with mindfulness and colouring in books (Hickey) — many artists dream of being able to have “normal” lives, and being able to make their work (Sakr and Ypil).

The “Capital” of The Lifted Brow incorporates not just capital cities, but also financial capital, symbolic and cultural capital, and the whole strange but comprehensively documented abstraction of material life from public expressions of life lived in relation to the market, rather than in relation to each other.

And we do need each other; Lech Blaine observes in his article about inheritance, “Rome wasn't built by a single insomniac”. We need community at least as much as we need money; and the effect of an imbalance of modes of capital is graphically represented in McDougall's contribution.

The writing in this volume is often confronting, sometimes experimental, sometimes sublime; but in each case it adumbrates a contemporary social and economic problem: the role of art in our culture.

There are various arguments in the discourse: that government is already providing significant support, in the form of grants, infrastructural support, tax breaks, and HECS support for art students; that it is up to artists to become better entrepreneurs; that there are plenty of creative careers, and artists should be prepared to take those—to write copy, to edit advertising flyers, et al.

Nonetheless, arts grants are risibly small, and typically support the costs of projects, not of living; moreover, while there are jobs that require creative skills and aptitude, these rarely produce art, but only the stuff of corporate and consumer culture.

The issue is that art is part of the culture, but it is not aligned with the logic of contemporary economics; and this is a wicked problem. Until, as a society, we have found a way to reconceptualise art's relationship with society, and to account for the true costs of making creative work, this problem will not go away.

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